

International Travel with Children

An estimated 1.9 million American children travel internationally each year, and the number is increasing. In general, children face most of the same health risks as their parents, but the consequences can be more serious. Some conditions can be difficult to recognize in children, especially in those who aren't talking yet. If you are planning to travel to another country with your kids, be familiar with the risks of travel to help them stay safe and healthy.

Diarrhea is among the most common illnesses experienced by children who are traveling. For infants, the best way to prevent diarrhea is breastfeeding. Older children visiting developing countries should follow basic food and water precautions: eat only food that is cooked and served hot, peel fresh fruits and vegetables or wash them in clean water, and drink only beverages from sealed containers or water that has been boiled or treated. Children should wash their hands or use alcohol-based hand cleaner frequently.

Children who travel to areas where malaria is a risk should take drugs to prevent malaria, just like their parents. Many of these drugs have a bitter taste, but a pharmacist can pulverize the capsules and put the powder in a flavorless gelatin capsule. Because of the risk of overdose, malaria drugs should be stored in childproof containers and kept out of the reach of children.

Malaria drugs are not 100% effective, and other diseases (such as dengue, zika, and yellow fever) also are spread by insects, so children (and their parents!) need to avoid bug bites. Children should wear bug spray and long pants and sleeves. Permethrin can be applied to clothes for extra protection. At night, children should sleep in screened, air-conditioned rooms or under a bed net.

Car crashes are the leading cause of death in children who travel, and drowning is the second-leading cause of death. Children should always ride in age-appropriate car seats when traveling. Parents should plan to bring car seats with them because they may not be available in many countries. Children should be supervised closely and should always wear a life preserver around water.

If possible, children should complete their routine childhood vaccines on the normal schedule before traveling overseas. However, if they must travel earlier, accelerated schedules are available for many vaccines. Some travel vaccines cannot be given to very young children, so it's important to check with a travel medicine specialist as early as possible before travel. For more information, visit www.cdc.gov.

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